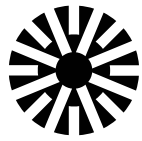


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JUNE 16, 2023



Americans and affirmative action: How the public sees the consideration of race in college admissions, hiring

BY [JOHN GRAMLICH](#)

The term “affirmative action” has a long history in the United States. One early reference appears in an [executive order that President John F. Kennedy signed in 1961](#), directing federal contractors to “take affirmative action” to prevent discrimination against job applicants and employees on the basis of race or other factors.

Today, affirmative action generally refers to programs aimed at boosting educational or employment opportunities for racial and ethnic minority groups that historically have faced discrimination. But the idea has sparked [many debates in recent years](#). Some Americans see these programs as an effective way to address past wrongs and increase racial and ethnic diversity in higher education and the workplace. Others view them as discriminatory in their own right.

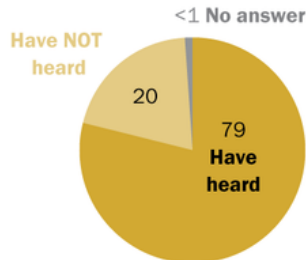
Here’s a closer look at what recent surveys have found about Americans’ views of affirmative action, both in a broad sense and in specific settings.

How we did this

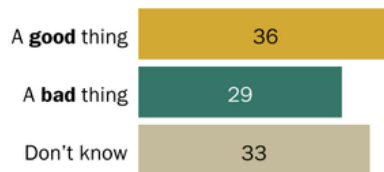
How familiar is the public with affirmative action?

Most Americans have heard of affirmative action; opinions about it are mixed

% of U.S. adults who _____ the phrase “affirmative action”



Among those who have heard the phrase “affirmative action,” % who say it is ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Dec. 5-11, 2022.

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In a December 2022 Pew Research Center survey, around eight-in-ten U.S. adults (79%) said they had ever heard the phrase “affirmative action.”

College graduates, those with higher incomes and older people were among the groups most likely have heard the term. For instance, 90% of Americans 65 and older said they had heard the phrase, compared with 65% of those ages 18 to 29. White and Black adults were also more likely than Asian or Hispanic adults to have heard the phrase.

How do Americans feel about affirmative action?

Public attitudes about affirmative action depend on how Americans are asked about it.

Americans who had heard the phrase affirmative action in the Center’s December survey were asked whether they saw it as a good or a bad thing. Among those who had ever heard the term, 36% said affirmative action is a good thing, 29% said it is a bad thing and a third weren’t sure.

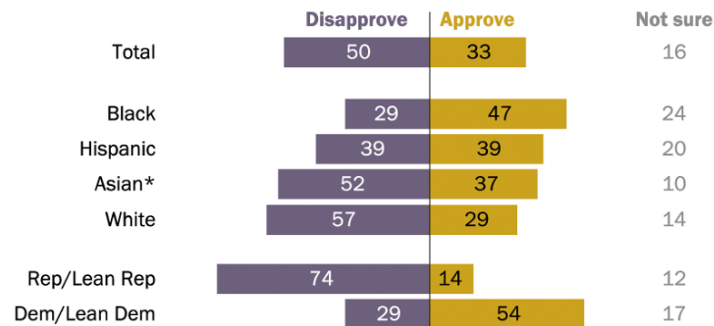
By comparison, Gallup has asked U.S. adults whether they “generally favor or oppose affirmative action programs for racial minorities.” In 2021, the last time Gallup asked this question, a [62% majority of Americans favored such programs](#).

Public attitudes about affirmative action can also vary depending on the specific context in which it is being discussed, such as in higher education or the workplace.

How do Americans view race and ethnicity as a factor in college admissions?

Half of U.S. adults disapprove of selective colleges considering race and ethnicity in admissions decisions, while a third approve

% who ____ of selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions in order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity at the school



*Estimates for Asian adults are representative of English speakers only.

Note: Black, Asian and White adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic; Hispanics are of any race. No answer responses not shown. See topline for full question wording.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 27-April 2, 2023.

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A larger share of Americans disapprove than approve of higher education institutions taking race and ethnicity into account when admitting students, according to several recent Center surveys.

In a [survey conducted in spring 2023](#), half of U.S. adults said they disapprove of selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account in admissions decisions in order to increase racial and ethnic diversity. A third of adults approved of this, while 16% were not sure.

In the same survey, 49% of Americans said the consideration of race and ethnicity makes the overall admissions process less fair, while only 20% said it makes the process fairer. Another 17% said it does not affect the fairness of the admissions process, while 13% said they weren't sure.

Other Center surveys have also found more opposition than support for the consideration of race and ethnicity in college admissions decisions.

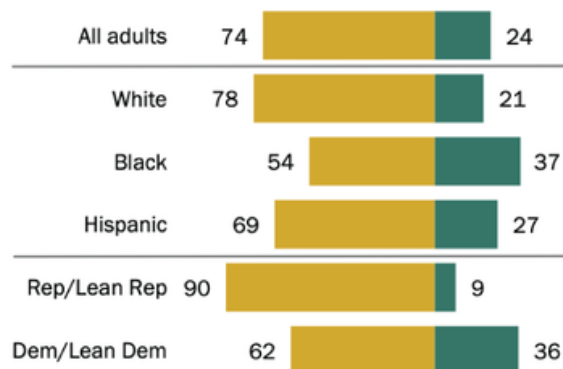
In the December 2022 survey, for example, 82% of U.S. adults said colleges should not consider race or ethnicity when deciding which students to accept, while only 17% said colleges should take this into account. Americans were far more likely to say that colleges should consider other factors, particularly high school grades and standardized test scores.

How do Americans view race and ethnicity as a factor in hiring?

In 2019, relatively small shares said employers should consider applicants' race and ethnicity in hiring, promotions

% saying, when it comes to decisions about hiring and promotions, companies and organizations should ...

- Only take a person's qualifications into account, even if it results in less diversity
- Take a person's race and ethnicity into account, in addition to qualifications, in order to increase diversity



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. White and Black adults include those who report being only one race and are not Hispanic. Hispanic adults are of any race. This question was asked of a random half of the sample; estimates for Asian adults are included in the total but are not shown separately due to small sample size. Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 22-Feb. 5, 2019. "Americans See Advantages and Challenges in Country's Growing Racial and Ethnic Diversity"

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Most Americans say companies should not take race and ethnicity into account when hiring or promoting workers, [according to a 2019 Center survey](#).

In that survey, 74% of U.S. adults said that, when making decisions about hiring and promotions, companies and organizations should take only a person's qualifications into account, even if it results in less diversity. Around a quarter (24%) said companies and organizations *should* take a person's race and ethnicity into account – in addition to qualifications – to increase diversity.

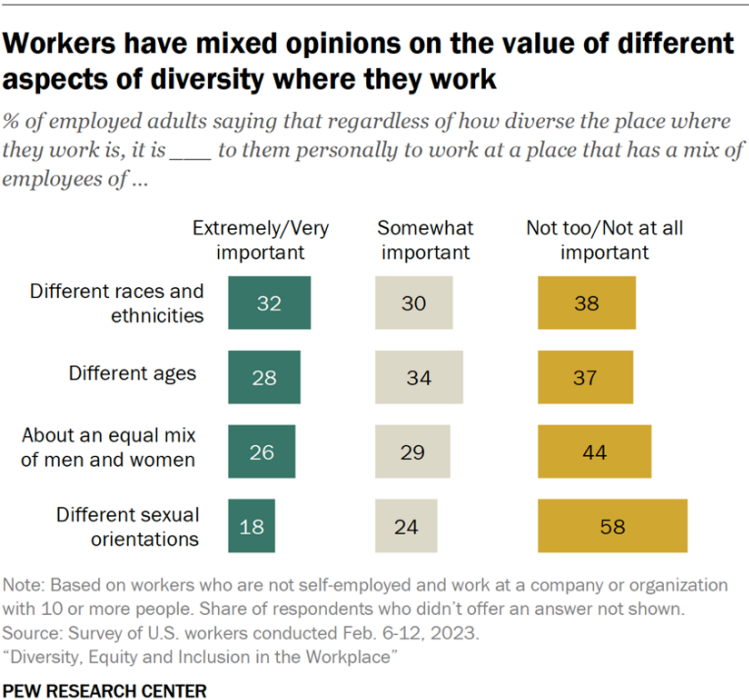
While most Americans disapprove of the consideration of race and ethnicity in hiring and promotion decisions, they still see value in a diverse workplace. Three-quarters of adults said in the 2019 survey that it was very or somewhat important for companies and organizations to promote racial and ethnic diversity in their workplace. Around a quarter (24%) said this was not too or not at all important.

How do Americans view recent efforts related to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in the workplace?

While public attitudes on DEI efforts in the workplace are much more positive than negative, a sizeable share of Americans say it is neither good nor bad, according to a [February 2023 Center survey of employed Americans](#).

In the survey, 56% of workers said that, in general, focusing on increasing diversity, equity and inclusion at work is mainly a good thing, while far fewer (16%) said it is a bad thing. Another 28% said it is neither good nor bad.

Still, relatively few workers attached a great deal of importance to diversity in their workplace. Only about a third (32%) said it’s extremely or very important to them to work somewhere with a mix of employees of different races and ethnicities.



How do attitudes on these topics vary by race and ethnicity?

Racial and ethnic minorities – especially Black Americans – are more likely than White Americans to support the consideration of race and ethnicity in college admissions and hiring decisions.

In the Center’s spring 2023 survey, around half of Black adults (47%) approved of selective colleges considering race and ethnicity in their admissions decisions, compared with 39% of Hispanic adults, 37% of Asian adults and 29% of White adults. In fact, Black adults were the only racial or ethnic group more likely to approve than disapprove of such efforts. Hispanic adults were evenly divided, while Asian and White adults were more likely to

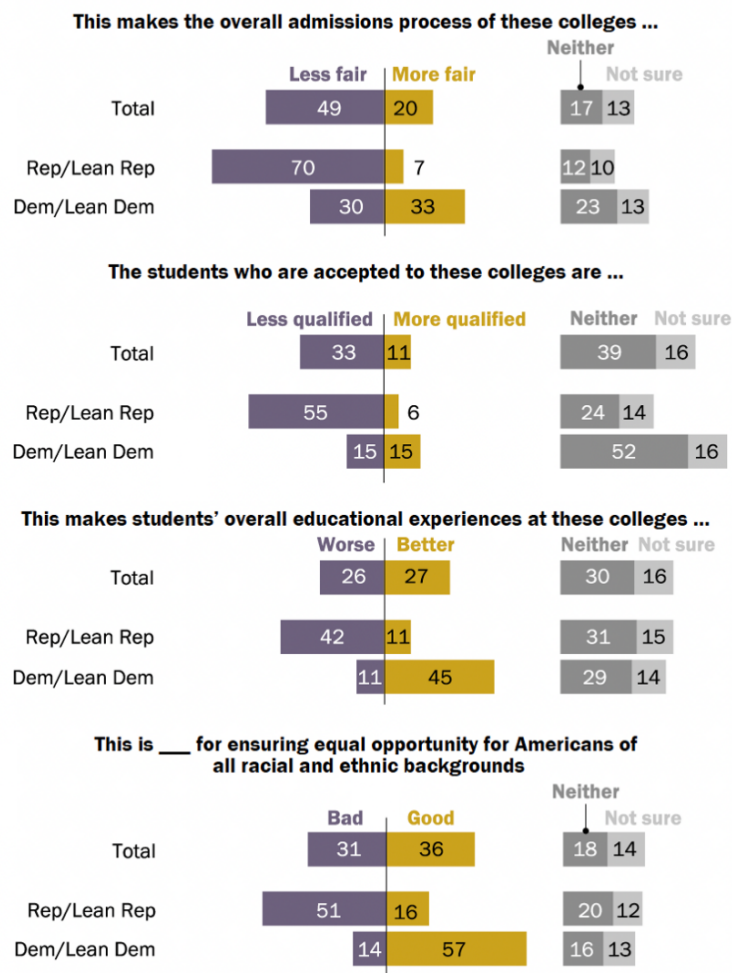
disapprove than approve. (These figures refer only to English-speaking Asian adults. For a closer look at views among Asian Americans – including those who do not speak English – read our recent report, [“Asian Americans Hold Mixed Views Around Affirmative Action.”](#))

When it comes to hiring and promotion decisions in the workplace, about four-in-ten Black adults (37%) said in the Center’s 2019 survey that companies and organizations should take a person’s race and ethnicity into account – in addition to their qualifications – in order to increase diversity. Hispanic (27%) and White (21%) adults were less likely to express this view. (There were not enough Asian adults in the survey sample to report their results separately.)

Are there partisan differences on these issues?

Most Republicans say considering race and ethnicity in college admissions makes the process less fair

% who say that when selective colleges and universities consider race and ethnicity as a factor in admissions decisions in order to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the school ...



Note: No answer responses not shown. See topline for full question wording.
Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 27-April 2, 2023.

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Yes. Democrats are far more likely than Republicans to approve of colleges and employers considering race and ethnicity.

In the Center's spring 2023 survey, more than half of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (54%) approved of selective colleges and universities taking race and ethnicity into account when making admissions decisions. Roughly three-quarters of Republicans and Republican leaners (74%) disapproved.

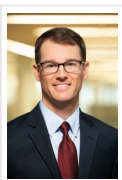
There were also wide partisan differences over how the consideration of race and ethnicity affects the college admissions process. Democrats were divided over whether it makes the overall admissions process fairer or less fair (33% and 30%, respectively, held these views). But by a margin of 70% to 7%, Republicans said it makes the process less fair.

In the 2019 survey about hiring and promotion decisions, majorities of Democrats and Republicans alike said companies and organizations should take only a person's qualifications into account, even if it results in less diversity. But Republicans were far more likely than Democrats to express this view (90% vs. 62%).

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